# Psychodynamics of Leadership and Climate Action: A Jungian Perspective

Eissa Hashemi
Maryam Tahmasebi

**Abstract.** This article explores the relationship between leadership psychodynamics and climate action through the lens of Jungian psychology. It argues that unconscious psychological forces—such as repression, projection, and the shadow—significantly shape leaders' decisions concerning climate change. Extending these dynamics to the organizational level, the paper conceptualizes an "organizational psyche" shaped by collective shadows and cultural narratives. It suggests that climate action denialism is often underpinned by deeper psychological patterns, particularly the shadows of control and scarcity, which manifest in the avoidance of accountability or the strategic manipulation of environmental messaging. The essay further examines how leadership complexes—such as attention, opportunity, and cultural complexes—can reinforce performative or opportunistic responses to environmental crises. Drawing on contemporary frameworks including ensemble leadership and resilient leadership, the analysis highlights leadership models capable of addressing these underlying dynamics through shared responsibility and emotional maturity. The article concludes by emphasizing the ethical imperative for leaders to confront their inner shadows in order to foster relational transparency, mutual accountability, and a collective shift toward intergenerational climate responsibility.

**Keywords:** Jungian psychology, shadow dynamics, climate action, environmental psychology, climate denialism, climate resilience, ensemble leadership, projection and repression, cultural complex, organizational psyche.

## Introduction

This essay explores how leaders' responses to environmental disasters—particularly climate change—can be understood through the lens of Jungian psychology. While grounded in a modern western analytical framework, this analysis builds upon Jungian concepts such as the collective unconscious, repression, projection, complexes, and the shadow. The underlying premise is that organizations and societies, like individuals, can be viewed as psychologically dynamic entities with unconscious processes that shape collective behavior.


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Jungian analysts have extended these insights beyond the individual, suggesting that societal systems can mirror internal psychological dynamics (Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Stein & Hollwitz, 1992; Pearson, 1996). Pearson (1996), for instance, conceptualizes the "organizational psyche" as a collective psychological field subject to repression, denial, projection, and complex formation—forces that often manifest in leadership decisions. These dynamics include not only affective responses like anxiety and shame but also structural reactions such as inaction or performative policy-making. Just as the unconscious operates in individuals, institutions can enact shadow processes by denying inconvenient truths, projecting responsibility, or repressing moral insight in the pursuit of legitimacy or stability.

Importantly, leadership is never a one-directional function. It exists within a reciprocal dynamic with followership whereby leaders shape and are shaped by and shaping the emotional tone, defenses, and collective imagination of those they serve. In the context of climate change, leaders are often tasked with representing and regulating collective anxieties, while followers project hopes, fears, or doubts onto them. When such exchanges are unacknowledged, unconscious forces such as projection, denial, or idealization distort both leadership actions and public responses. Leadership and followership, then, function together as carriers of the organizational psyche, mutually reinforcing its conscious values and unconscious defenses.

This essay examines how climate denialism, avoidance of accountability, and environmental policy distortions are linked to psychological defenses embedded in leadership (Weart, 2011). While these behaviors are often discussed in political or strategic terms, they can also be understood as unconscious reactions rooted in deeper psychic patterns. When viewed through the Jungian lens, leadership is not only a functional role but also a symbolic and affective channel through which collective anxiety, projection, and repression operate. Organizations are not neutral systems but psychologically active fields—places where unconscious fears, cultural myths, and symbolic identities shape how problems are defined and responses are structured. When the organizational psyche remains unexamined, decisions risk being driven not by rational deliberation but by shadow material—unacknowledged desires, anxieties, and blind spots that shape leaders' moral and strategic reasoning.

The essay proceeds as follows: section 2 introduces foundational concepts from Jungian psychology, including the unconscious, shadow, and complex and describes how these operate within the organizational psyche. Section 3 applies psychological insights to climate perception and environmental attitudes, linking individual and collective defense mechanisms to climate inaction. Section 4 explores contemporary leadership models and introduces the leadership triangle—power, influence, and people—as a framing tool. Sections 5 through 7 examine core Jungian defense patterns—repression, projection, and complex formation—and analyze how these shape leadership decisions, public trust, and climate policy. Section 8 then proposes psychologically integrated leadership frameworks, including ensemble, servant, and resilient leadership. Finally, Section 9 reflects on the ethical imperative of shadow integration and shared responsibility in climate action.

## Jungian Psychology and the Organizational Psyche

Jungian psychology begins with the premise that much of human behavior is governed not solely by conscious thought, but also by the unconscious—a vast inner realm composed of

forgotten memories, instincts, archetypes, and emotionally charged complexes. In Jung's theory, the unconscious is not only reactive but also purposeful (Jung & Hull, 1968). It seeks integration by what Jung called the process of individuation through which a person becomes psychologically whole by confronting and assimilating previously unconscious material.

Denial or repression is a form of psychological defense mechanism where an individual unconsciously rejects uncomfortable or distressing aspects of reality, protecting their conscious mind from discomfort (Hollis, 2005). Repression, closely related to denial, involves the active but unconscious process of pushing distressing thoughts, memories, or desires out of conscious awareness to maintain psychological equilibrium (Jung, 1969). In an organizational and societal setting, denial or repression can be seen as cultural or political opposition against certain notions or narratives (Yeager, 2024). For example, a political party in the United States can deny or try to suppress historical notions of racial injustice to appeal to their inherent cultural racism. Given that the psychological dynamic is examined on a broader societal scale rather than an individual level, the significance of unconscious patterns within societies must be emphasized (Pearson, 1996). Societies, like the human psyche, have conscious and unconscious realms. This concept could be seen in the historical pattern of denialism or rejection in a social context (Leka & Furnham, 2023; Norgaard, 2011).

One of the most striking differences between conscious and unconscious realms in societies lies in the question of why. When a decision or concept has a clear rationale and is well-explained to society, it is less likely to be unconscious. Instead, suppose such concepts are covered with vague explanations or one-sided perspectives that might be rooted in cognitive dissonance. In that case, the idea has fallen into the unconscious. One of the examples of such a notion is how capitalism has shifted its intention from a customer-centered system to a profit-centered system (Sinek, 2024). Adam Smith's idea of a system based on production and customer preferences has shifted to a business that maximizes profits, which Milton Friedman suggested (as cited in Sinek, 2024). In the new unconscious direction of capitalism, since the main objective is to maximize profit, the line between ethics and care for higher values becomes shady and subjective. Therefore, society unconsciously shifts to more economically justified environmental degradation and even focuses their moral conviction on denying their responsibility for ethics, the environment, and future generations (Cardarelli & Pomper, 2024).

Another central figure in this process is the shadow—the part of the unconscious that holds the traits, thoughts, and desires that individuals find undesirable or incompatible with their conscious identity. These might include aggression, fear, dependency, or selfishness—impulses that are disowned and repressed but continue to influence behavior indirectly (Zweig & Abrams, 1991). Shadow material tends to erupt in emotionally charged situations, distorting perception, fueling interpersonal conflict, or being projected onto others. Jung insisted that unless the shadow is acknowledged and integrated, it controls the psyche from the background: "Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate" (Jung, Adler, & Hull, 1969, p. 237).

While Jung's early work focused on the inner life of individuals, later theorists extended his ideas to larger systems. Just as individuals possess an unconscious, so too do groups, organizations, and cultures (Hollis, 2007). These collectives develop their own psychic defenses—mechanisms such as repression, denial, projection, and splitting—

which operate beneath formal rules or stated values. When a government consistently avoids confronting ecological degradation, or when a corporation frames environmental responsibility as someone else's problem, these responses can be interpreted not only as strategic but also as psychological defenses rooted in collective fear, guilt, or shame.

The term organizational psyche was developed by theorists like Stein and Hollwitz (1992) and further elaborated by Pearson (1996) to describe the unconscious field of shared values, anxieties, fantasies, and moral dilemmas that structure institutional behavior. Psyche acts as a container for both creative vision and psychological defenses. Just as individuals might repress uncomfortable truths about themselves, so too can an organization repress environmental risk, project blame onto outside actors, or develop shadow myths that rationalize harmful behavior.

These unconscious dynamics do not arise in a vacuum. They are shaped by cultural narratives, historical trauma, and collective identity structures. For example, in many industrialized nations, the cultural shadow may contain unacknowledged feelings of ecological guilt, anxiety over scarce resources, or suppressed knowledge of colonial exploitation—each of which can unconsciously shape climate policy, public messaging, or institutional behavior (Allan et al., 2023).

Recognizing the collective shadow allows leaders to move beyond reactive or performative responses and begin addressing the deeper psychological patterns that sustain climate denial or policy paralysis. When leadership and policy are informed by awareness of these dynamics, it becomes possible to foster a more integrated and ethically grounded approach—one that engages not only with external data but with the inner architecture of belief, fear, and resistance embedded in organizational life (Kiehl, 2023).

**Understanding Climate Change: A Psychological Perspective**

Environmental psychology explores the relationship between humans and their surroundings, with particular attention to how individuals perceive, respond to, and emotionally process ecological threats. When applied to climate change, this field offers crucial insights into the disconnection between scientific awareness and behavioral engagement. Though the existential risks of climate change are well documented and broadly communicated, public and political responses often remain inconsistent, delayed, or symbolic. These inconsistencies reflect not only structural or political constraints but also deep psychological tensions embedded in how individuals and societies relate to environmental uncertainty (Steg & DeGroot, 2018).

The gap is particularly noticeable among leaders, whose beliefs and values significantly shape the development and implementation of mitigation and adaptation strategies, which are the cornerstones of climate action. While many leaders publicly acknowledge the urgency of climate change, their actions often fall short of their stated commitments. This discrepancy cannot be fully understood through a rational or policy lens alone. Psychological research shows that values, emotions, identity, and social context profoundly shape environmental behavior—even in the presence of clear information (Steg & DeGroot, 2018).

Given the complexity of such an environmental concern, Steg (2023) distinguished beliefs about climate change from climate actions to combat the problem, stipulating that there are major climate change beliefs that people would adopt according to their societal conditions. They would perceive it as real (a natural occurrence), believe that it is caused

by humans, or believe that it carries more negative consequences than positive ones. These three layers of beliefs show the predisposed notion of human-caused interaction with nature and how people perceive its concept. This article suggests that Steg's assertion of individual belief in climate change could also be applied to societies. Leaders, like all individuals, interpret climate data through filters of cultural meaning, cognitive bias, and emotional defense. These factors can unconsciously drive decisions that appear contradictory, ineffective, or even evasive.

One of the central concerns of environmental psychology is how individuals respond to large-scale, abstract threats such as climate change. As a global, complex, and often invisible phenomenon, climate change presents unique psychological challenges—eliciting a mix of cognitive dissonance, emotional overwhelm, and moral conflict. One of the most telling manifestations of such an internal conflict is the shift from "old denial" to "new denial**"**—a change that reflects not just evolving rhetoric, but also deeper psychological strategies of avoidance. In the old paradigm, climate change was outright rejected—viewed as a hoax or scientifically unfounded (CCDH report: The new climate denial, 2024; Yeager, 2024).

Today, however, explicit denial is less common, particularly in leadership and institutional spaces. Instead, what emerges is a subtler form of psychological defense: leaders acknowledge that climate change exists, but they minimize its implications, delay necessary actions, or overemphasize individual responsibility while deflecting structural accountability. This "new denial" is marked by emotional distancing, abstract framing, and overly optimistic narratives that downplay the severity or urgency of the crisis. In this way, acknowledgment becomes a façade for inaction.

The mentioned phenomenon reveals the operation of defense mechanisms like repression and rationalization—where difficult truths are intellectually accepted but emotionally disengaged. Leaders may publicly affirm climate science while privately resisting policy measures that threaten economic growth, institutional stability, or political capital. This form of defense allows individuals and organizations to appear responsive while avoiding the deeper ethical and systemic changes required to combat the climate emergency.

Environmental psychology helps decode these tensions by highlighting the emotional and cognitive ambivalence at the heart of climate response. Feelings of helplessness, guilt, or grief often underlie patterns of disengagement or delay. Without conscious reflection, these feelings may be redirected into symbolic actions, rhetorical performance, or administrative postponement. In such a context, climate inaction is not simply a failure of will—it is also a manifestation of unresolved psychological conflict (Steg, 2023).

Understanding such a dynamic is especially important for leadership, where public expectations and systematic pressures amplify unconscious defenses. Leaders are often caught between the need to respond decisively and the temptation to preserve the status quo. Their actions, or lack thereof, serve as psychological signals to the public, shaping how followers interpret and internalize climate risk. A psychologically aware framework enables us to see these behaviors not just as policy gaps, but also as expressions of deeper affective and symbolic struggles around identity, responsibility, and future loss.

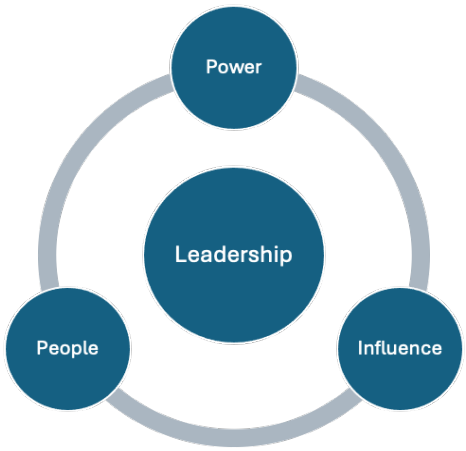
## Leadership in the Context of Climate Change

Leadership theory has evolved significantly over the past century, reflecting changing social values and organizational needs. Early leadership models, such as transactional leadership, emphasized formal authority, reward structures, and role clarity—focusing primarily on compliance and stability (Mintzberg, 2009; Northouse, 2016; Yukl & Gardner, 2019). As organizations became more complex and value driven, transformational leadership emerged, highlighting vision, inspiration, and the capacity to motivate followers through shared goals and ethical alignment. In recent decades, the focus has expanded further toward contemporary models such as servant leadership, authentic leadership, and relational leadership, which emphasize emotional intelligence, humility, moral accountability, and inclusivity (Riggio, 2023).

These shifts are particularly relevant to climate leadership, which requires both strategic coordination and deep psychological awareness. The complexities of climate change—its uncertainty, moral ambiguity, and long time horizon—demand more than technical problem-solving. They call for leadership that is self-reflective, ethically grounded, and capable of navigating not only data and policy but also emotion, fear, and collective resistance (Cardarelli & Pomper, 2024).

To better understand the psychological dynamics of leadership in this context, the paper introduces the leadership triangle—a framework consisting of power, influence, and people. These three dimensions interact constantly in leadership decisions and relational processes (Figure 1). Power refers to the ability to set direction and control resources; influence reflects the capacity to shape others' perceptions, motivations, and values; and people refers to the relational field in which leadership occurs—followers, constituents, communities, and co-leaders. When any corner of this triangle becomes overemphasized or repressed, shadow dynamics emerge: control becomes domination, influence turns manipulative, and relationships are reduced to transactional roles or symbolic tokens.

**Figure 1**
Three Pillars of Leadership



Contemporary leadership theories such as servant leadership and authentic leadership offer pathways toward more ethical and psychologically integrated leadership. Servant leadership, originally developed by Greenleaf (2008), places the needs of others, especially the most vulnerable, at the center of leadership action. It emphasizes humility, listening, and the moral imperative to serve. In climate leadership, this model aligns with community-based action, environmental justice, and long-term stewardship. For instance, initiatives like the American Climate Corps demonstrate servant-leadership principles in practice, mobilizing volunteers for ecosystem restoration and public awareness (AmeriCorps, 2023).

However, from a Jungian perspective, servant leadership also carries inherent risks. Leaders who outwardly present as humble and service-oriented may unconsciously suppress their own authority, leading to passive decision-making or vulnerability to projection. In polarized or skeptical contexts, servant leaders may be misread as weak or manipulative, resulting in mistrust or backlash from communities that expect more assertive action. These reactions often stem from collective shadow dynamics, where anxiety and disempowerment are unconsciously projected onto leadership figures.

Authentic leadership, similarly, emphasizes self-awareness, transparency, and moral clarity (Hickman, 2016). Authentic leaders strive to act in alignment with their values, even in times of crisis. However, the theory is not without complexity. Scholars such as Verhaal and Dobrev (2022) describe the "authenticity paradox" in which rigid notions of personal integrity can hinder adaptation, communication, or collective responsiveness. In the climate space, where unpredictability and collaboration are essential, excessive emphasis on individual authenticity may undermine organizational learning or create blind spots. From a Jungian view, such a paradox reflects a deeper tension between ego identity and shadow integration: when the persona of authenticity becomes a fixed ideal, it can obscure the unconscious fears or biases that require reflection and transformation.

Both servant and authentic leadership models have the potential to support psychologically mature climate leadership. However, their true effectiveness depends on a leader's capacity to work with their own shadow material, respond relationally to collective dynamics, and remain open to discomfort and contradiction. Climate change is not only a scientific and political problem—it is also a psychological challenge that confronts leaders with their deepest values, fears, and ethical limits. Leadership must move beyond charisma, aesthetics or compliance toward what Jung might describe as an individuated form of leadership—a style grounded in both conscious responsibility and the courage to confront the unknown.

**The Role of Psychological Dynamics in Climate Action Denialism**

Denial and repression are among the most prominent psychological responses to the existential threat posed by climate change. These mechanisms operate both at the individual and collective levels, serving to manage the anxiety, guilt, and moral discomfort associated with environmental degradation (Steg & DeGroot, 2018). From a Jungian perspective, denial and repression are not simply failures of awareness but also active psychic strategies that prevent the ego from confronting realities that threaten its stability. In the climate context, this concept means that scientific evidence and ecological signals may be intellectually acknowledged but emotionally disowned, resulting in performative

concern, delayed action, or outright resistance (Hamilton, 2024; Nogaard, 2011; Williams & Graham, 2021).

Interestingly, such a perspective ties to an assumption mentioned in environmental psychology (Steg & DeGroot, 2018) on how humans perceive environmental problems. Humans are more prone to reject any inconveniences caused by their actions and instead celebrate the pleasant results of that problem. Since the impacts of global warming are not necessarily immediate, evident, and consistent, it is challenging for leaders to understand the environment as a comprehensive and complex system. Therefore, they will either normalize, minimize, or, in some contexts, deny any related plans or actions (Mendy et al., 2024).

Repression, in the current context, often emerges when climate realities evoke overwhelming feelings—grief over biodiversity loss, fear of societal collapse, or shame about personal or national contributions to carbon emissions. These emotions, when unintegrated, are pushed into the unconscious where they begin to influence behavior indirectly. Repression may appear as policy avoidance, technocratic distraction, or an over-reliance on vague optimism (Clayton, 2019).

Leaders might promote the rhetoric of sustainability while continuing to support extractive industries, not necessarily out of deceit, but because their deeper emotional ambivalence remains unresolved. One of the reasons leaders would choose to deny climate action is the feeling of shame associated with the responsibility of action and plans. Emotional dynamic could also be the root cause of other reactions. For example, in the case of "Black Summer," the 2019–2020 bushfire season in Australia, the government was under significant criticism for downplaying and denying the role of climate change in such a disaster due to the emotional burden of accountability in governance (*Commonwealth of Australia*, 2020).

### *Shadow and Climate Action Denialism*

Climate action denialism is one of the significant concepts where the Jungian concept of the shadow becomes particularly pertinent. The shadow represents the disowned aspects of the self—qualities, urges, or insights that are incompatible with one's conscious identity. In the case of climate leadership, shadows often take the form of two interrelated patterns: the shadow of control and the shadow of scarcity.

The shadow of control is expressed in the impulse to dominate or rationalize complex climate issues through authority, order, or technocratic expertise. This shadow seeks to suppress uncertainty by asserting managerial dominance over nature, treating ecological systems as problems to be fixed rather than relationships to be healed (Williams & Graham, 2021). Leaders operating from shadow of control often avoid shared governance or participatory models in favor of centralized decision-making, justified through urgency or efficiency. They may repress their own vulnerability, presenting as calm and authoritative while unconsciously resisting more collaborative or emotionally attuned approaches (Gross, 2020).

The mentioned type of shadow is especially evident in how some governments respond to environmental crises such as wildfires. For example, in the case of recurring wildfires in California, state responses often prioritize damage control and risk management over preventive strategies that would require deeper societal changes in land use, consumption, and emissions (Swain et al., 2025). These patterns reflect a reluctance

to face the systemic causes of climate disruption, revealing a shadow dynamic masked by bureaucratic resolve.

The shadow of scarcity, on the other hand, emerges from deep cultural fears about loss, lack, and insecurity. It expresses itself in climate debates in zero-sum thinking, nationalist rhetoric, and resistance to redistribution (Riggio, 2023). When societies feel threatened by scarcity—whether of water, energy, or resources—they may turn toward exclusion, competition, or denial as a form of psychological defense. Leaders shaped by this shadow may emphasize economic growth over sustainability, avoid discussions of reparative justice, or resist climate agreements perceived as threatening national autonomy (Soleki et al., 2024).

A particularly relevant example is the way carbon credit systems are used as a symbolic solution to climate responsibility. While designed to incentivize emissions reduction, these systems can also allow powerful actors to project moral responsibility elsewhere—offsetting guilt without addressing structural overconsumption (Chaudhry, 2024). Such mechanisms become tools not only of market logic but also of psychic displacement, allowing individuals and institutions to manage discomfort without integrating it.

These shadow dynamics also help explain cultural and political resistance to climate policy. When climate change challenges core identities such as autonomy, prosperity, or moral innocence, it activates defenses that make honest engagement difficult (Allan et al., 2023). Repression and projection become ways to avoid ethical reckoning. Leaders may frame environmentalism as elitist or radical, not necessarily because they misunderstand the science but because they are defending against a perceived threat to their values, power, or worldview (Clayton, 2019; Smith & Leiserowitz, 2014).

By understanding denial and repression not as ignorance but as psychological processes shaped by shadow dynamics, we can better grasp the emotional undercurrents of climate inaction. Leadership in the current context requires more than rhetorical commitment—it demands psychological courage, ethical reflexivity, and the willingness to confront what has been disowned.

**Projection and Climate Responsibility**

In Jungian psychology, projection is the process by which individuals unconsciously attribute their own unwanted, disowned, or unresolved feelings, desires, and aspects of themselves to others (Hollis, 2005). This mechanism enables the ego to displace discomfort or moral tension outward, preserving a stable self-image without confronting deeper emotional conflict. As Hollis (2016) succinctly put it, “We see the world not as it is but as we are” (p. 7). Projection not only distorts perception but also influences interpersonal and systemic dynamics, especially in leadership where responsibility and identity are publicly negotiated. Groups, organizations, and nations, like individuals, often project internal contradictions or failures onto others. In the context of climate change, it becomes a potent psychological strategy for managing moral discomfort, delaying accountability, and reinforcing geopolitical inequities.

Leaders and institutions often unconsciously project responsibility for environmental degradation onto other actors—be they foreign governments, rival industries, or the general public. This can take the form of whataboutism, scapegoating, or moral grandstanding. The term is referred to in debates when one party uses the topic’s

complexity against an honest response to redirect and distract from the core problem (Aikin & Casey, 2024; Bowel, 2023). For instance, political leaders may downplay domestic emissions while criticizing other nations for their lack of climate action. Corporations may market themselves as sustainable while shifting responsibility to consumers through behavioral campaigns that emphasize recycling or individual carbon footprints. These practices reflect a deeper psychological impulse: the desire to dissociate from guilt or complicity by displacing it onto others (Singer & Kimbles, 2004).

From a Jungian perspective, such displacement is a form of shadow avoidance—a refusal to integrate the darker or inconvenient aspects of one's own environmental impact. When leadership becomes fixated on the failures of others, it can evade meaningful self-examination and ethical transformation. Projection thus operates as a barrier to true climate responsibility. It not only distorts public discourse but also fosters division, resentment, and paralysis—especially when used to justify inaction or blame-shifting at the systemic level.

The mentioned dynamic is especially visible in global climate negotiations. Nations in the Global North, which have historically contributed the most carbon emissions, often emphasize the current or future emissions of the Global South as a rationale for delaying ambitious reforms. Such projection of accountability reflects deeper psychological mechanisms. Developed countries, grappling with collective guilt or unconscious shame (Yeager, 2024), may project responsibility onto developing nations, arguing that their lack of progress, poor governance, or industrial emissions are primary obstacles to global climate goals (Mullen & Widener, 2022; Allan et al., 2023). Conversely, leaders in developing countries may resist climate obligations until historical responsibility is acknowledged—insisting that developed nations address the ecological debt created by centuries of extractive industrialization.

These mutual projections entrench stalemates and obstruct genuine collaboration. Rather than confronting their own complicity, leaders externalize blame, deflect responsibility, and perpetuate resentment. Psychological dynamics such as cognitive dissonance, cultural defensiveness, and displacement further hinder consensus, fostering emotional distance between policy commitments and global realities (Steg, 2023).

Moreover, psychological projection feeds into polarized narratives. It fosters the belief that climate failure stems from the apathy, ignorance, or irresponsibility of others—be they political opponents, developing countries, or noncompliant populations—rather than recognizing shared complicity or structural entrenchment. Such a division often reduces climate discourse to moral binaries, eclipsing the complexity and interconnectedness of the crisis. In doing so, it creates psychological distance between leaders and the systemic change they are tasked with advancing.

Jungian analysis invites a different approach. It urges leaders to recognize and retrieve their projections—to see in "the other" the qualities they have disowned or suppressed. Applied to climate leadership, accepting institutional complicity, acknowledging ethical ambiguity, and committing to shared responsibility rather than judgment would mean such a shift. This requires emotional maturity, cultural humility, and a willingness to confront one's own shadow—qualities not often associated with geopolitical discourse, but essential for long-term climate collaboration.

By identifying projection as a core psychological mechanism in climate inaction, the following section highlights the need for leadership grounded in reflexivity and moral

integration. Only when leaders are willing to recognize their complicity—and resist the temptation to assign blame—can truly cooperative and transformative climate responses emerge.

## Leadership Complexes and Their Impact on Climate Action

In Jungian psychology, a complex is defined as an accumulation of unresolved psychic energy centered around emotionally charged experiences or themes. Hollis (2005) has described a complex as "an autonomous, unconscious constellation of feelings, thoughts, memories, and behaviors" (p. 58). When projected onto leadership and institutional behavior, complexes can distort decision-making, block ethical reflection, and foster cycles of inaction or inconsistency. In the context of climate action, leadership complexes reveal how unresolved emotional, cultural, or symbolic material manifests in public narratives, policy choices, and social resistance.

### *The Attention-Complex*

One form of the Jungian complex that could be speculated is the attention-complex, where performative gestures substitute for meaningful change. Leaders may issue climate declarations, attend global summits, or launch public-facing campaigns while avoiding substantive policy transformation. This complex is not merely strategic—it also reflects a psychic defense mechanism. By focusing attention on optics and symbolism, leaders can gain legitimacy while repressing their internal ambivalence, fear of backlash, or unconscious resistance to change. In doing so, they channel public anxiety into highly visible but low-risk actions that maintain the appearance of concern while deferring actual accountability. The attention-complex also thrives in highly mediated political environments where visibility becomes a currency of influence (Graham et al., 2016). Leaders consumed by such a dynamic may begin to equate visibility with virtue, believing that awareness campaigns, declarations, or symbolic gestures suffice to meet the ethical demands of climate leadership. Such performative leadership often evokes temporary public reassurance while contributing to long-term frustration, disillusionment, and climate fatigue.

The attention-complex could create resentment in followers based on how much focus and attention that attitude has received. Moreover, specific emotions and behaviors could be associated with climate actions regarding human interaction with nature and create negative consequences. Obsession, constant guilt, a sense of inferiority, and powerlessness could be examples of such feelings as the result of such a complex (Steg, 2023).

It is important to note that part of such a complex is rooted in a heuristic mindset, in which people believe that, since there are fewer negative tangible consequences of climate change, they would minimize the impacts and severity of such a phenomenon (Steg, 2023). A complex of this nature would adversely affect policies and leadership decisions regarding climate change. It also emphasizes the shadow of rejection and creates resentment in followers as it makes them more responsible and accountable for their actions. A leadership complex can create antipathy, especially in agriculture and carbon mitigation markets. One of the best examples of such a complex is the German farmers' protest of policy implementation, economic pressure, and environmental regulations. In the fall of 2024, German farmers protested the government's environmental policies, putting them under extreme economic pressure. Even though farmers faced the consequences of

climate change, they demonstrated their distance from such policies (Bienvenu et al., 2024). That is to say, German policymakers could be seen as having an attention-complex because of the protest.

In addition, the attention-complex could result from advanced approaches to an environment that would create a list of emotions, such as collective guilt, shame, resentment, and sadness, because of facing climate change impacts. It can also stem from the need for more awareness in both leadership and followers regarding their responsibility and interchangeable dynamics with nature. The attention-complex could be expanded for industrialized and developing countries since it creates a vision of equal accountability, attention, and urgency.

Another form of attention-complex is when leaders follow a preferred perspective on climate actions, dismissing or ignoring the existence of other factors. Such a complex could stem from a leader's economic interest in not seeing reality. It may also reflect the core concept of political leadership, where leaders, thanks to their interpretation of the philosophy of power (Jost & Sidanius, 2004), would adopt confirmation bias and look at reality with a premeditative assumption. In this type of complex, leaders don't deny their responsibility or refuse accountability. Instead, they partially focus on environmental concerns. As a result, they appear to be caring for climate impact action plans, but their preferred vision could create ambiguity in their climate initiatives. The notion of ambiguity, where leaders address a problem but not its entirety, is a byproduct of attention-complex.

*Opportunity-Complex*

A second form is the opportunity-complex, where climate discourse is co-opted for personal or political gain. Leaders may use environmental language to position themselves as progressive, while simultaneously advancing policies that maintain the status quo. This dynamic can also emerge across political transitions, where successive governments reverse climate commitments to differentiate their platform or appease economic stakeholders. Fo example, debates about Germany's *Energiewende* ("energy transition") illustrate how public resistance to renewable energy infrastructure, like wind farms, reflects practical concerns and deeper psychological resistance rooted in local identity, disrupted worldviews, and ecological ambivalence. (Federal ministry report, 2021). These dynamics are shaped by a cultural complex of loss, where shifting environmental priorities threaten familiar modes of economic stability and place attachment.

The opportunity-complex shows leaders how to mitigate or adapt strategies to increase their profit and expand their impact. The nuance of such a complex is that, in hindsight, it might be very beneficial to have an opportunistic leader who follows the policy and creates new lines of inquiry. Even if it may look advantageous for the equity and inclusion strategies, since the levels of access to resources and community engagement matter for their objectives. However, it creates a chance to manipulate the influence or the information to increase the opportunity.

Leaders may exaggerate or minimize some impacts of products or climate initiatives to achieve financial or political party benefits. The best example of this type of complex is electric vehicles. Leaders are very interested in investing in creating infrastructure for charging stations and encouraging consumers to purchase electric vehicles (Woodley et al., 2013). Instead, they would ridicule or ignore the costly environmental degradation that cobalt and lithium excavations will cause to the

environment. In other words, leaders facing this type of complex are unwilling to see their climate initiatives' ecological footprints.

The nuance of this type of complex is that it creates a chance for a leader either to manipulate or to overemphasize a particular climate strategy. The manipulative aspect of such a shadow can create several social and cultural complexes. Such aspect can be tied to political disinformation and misinformation about climate change, as well as public mistrust of politicians and scientists about the consequences of climate change. Consequently, the complex of opportunity creates room for leaders to seek their personal or political advantages and to ignore the reality of climate change.

*Cultural Complex; Economics Growth vs. Ecological Sustainability*

The most entrenched dynamic, however, may be the cultural complex—a collective psychological field shaped by myth, memory, and historical trauma. Cultural complexes manifest when shared values, anxieties, and symbolic attachments prevent a society from adapting to new realities. In the context of climate impact, one of the most significant is the unresolved tension between perpetual economic growth and ecological sustainability (Singer & Kimbles, 2004). Many nations remain psychologically invested in growth as a symbol of prosperity, security, and success. Climate policies that challenge this growth imperative often provoke unconscious fears of scarcity, decline, or collapse. These fears are rarely addressed explicitly, but they animate resistance to degrowth frameworks, carbon regulation, or redistribution mechanisms. The cultural attachment to GDP metrics, industrial dominance, and consumer expansion acts as a symbolic reassurance that progress continues—even if such progress undermines long-term planetary health. As a result, policies advocating for ecological balance are often dismissed as unrealistic, threatening, or regressive. Thus, the cultural complex of growth operates as both a narrative and a psychic defense—protecting collective identity while undermining adaptive capacity. Until these myths are consciously examined, societies may remain locked in a psychological loop that prioritizes short-term gain over ecological responsibility.

At the leadership level, these complexes create barriers to moral clarity and strategic coherence. Leaders navigating complex cultural terrain may find themselves caught between conflicting loyalties: to economic stakeholders, cultural myths, or international expectations. They are often expected to provide certainty and inspiration in moments of ecological uncertainty—shouldering the burden of public hope while concealing their own fear, ambivalence, or lack of clarity. This dissonance can produce internal psychic pressure, where leaders unconsciously adopt reactive strategies—fluctuating between performance, opportunism, and avoidance. Leaders may project decisiveness outward while feeling increasingly alienated inward, especially when policy decisions are constrained by political cycles, lobbying pressure, or public ambivalence. In such conditions, they may default to symbolic leadership—deploying emotionally resonant narratives or policy gestures that provide comfort but avoid systemic risk. These patterns are not signs of individual weakness but symptoms of deeper unresolved energy within the organizational psyche. Leaders risk becoming carriers of unresolved societal tension and expressing collective confusion rather than vision.

Polarization in society would be one of the significant outcomes of the cultural complex (Singer & Kimbles, 2004). Leaders would create the contrasting factor among different groups of people, demonizing their values and downplaying their ethical

responsibility, carrying the agenda of capitalized industrial values. Consequently, when leaders were faced with significant environmental disasters, they would identify with one side of the problem and project the other side onto other groups or countries. One of the most recent examples of this concept is the Los Angeles wildfires in January 2025, where over 57,000 acres and 18,000 structures were burned ("A state under siege", 2025). The different reactions between the California governor and the United States president on addressing wildfires as the consequences of climate change are the best example of cultural complex, where one side talks about the state's resources to fight climate change and the other side downplays to lack of enough water resources ("**Trump threatens federal intervention"**, 2025).

**Fostering Effective Climate Leadership Through Jungian Insights**

In the modern era, the general premise of leadership revolves around the heroic leadership theory (Spector, 2016), which posits that an individual who possesses exceptional qualities and abilities embodies a heroic figure with a vision and charisma that inspire and influence others. Leadership is understood as a position embedded in a psychological and cultural field, constantly interacting with collective fears, hopes, histories, and defenses. This essay has conceptualized leadership through the triangle of power, influence, and people, a framework that illustrates how psychological energy accumulates around these relational dynamics (Figure 1). When leadership becomes fixated on one dimension—clinging to control, seeking influence through performance, or disconnecting from the needs of people—unconscious distortions take hold. These distortions often manifest in the form of shadow dynamics, including denial, projection, or complex formation.

In the case of the environment and climate change, this essay advocates separating science and politics. However, leaders will react to scientific findings that impact their influence or power, even if it means minimizing the impact of climate change or insinuating skepticism on environmental activism. They'll acquire the resources to fight against such a narrative.

Effective climate leadership must therefore begin with an awareness of these unconscious forces. Performative behavior, moral exceptionalism, and reactive policymaking can be signs of unacknowledged shadow dynamics, not merely strategic failures. Leaders who cannot recognize these dynamics risk becoming agents of the very confusion and fragmentation they seek to solve. A psychologically informed model of leadership must recognize that inner conflict and systemic complexity are inseparable—and that progress requires holding contradiction, not erasing it.

Alongside that, the concept of resilient leadership becomes essential. Resilience, in this sense, does not mean stoic endurance or optimism but a psychological capacity to hold tension, recover from failure, and metabolize fear into ethical clarity. Resilient leaders are emotionally intelligent, self-aware, adaptable, and grounded in the communities they serve (Coutu, 2002; Hickman, 2016). They do not react reflexively but respond relationally, balancing vision with humility, and urgency with inclusivity. Research on leadership resilience also emphasizes the role of crucibles—transformational moments of challenge—and highlights the importance of values, integrity, and relational awareness in navigating high-stakes situations (Hashemi, 2019; Kelly & Hashemi, 2022).

This vision of resilience is incomplete without attention to community resilience—the ability of communities to adapt to trauma, inequality, and environmental disruption

(Norris et al., 2008). Climate change impacts are unevenly distributed, and resilience often resides in marginalized groups like Indigenous peoples, women of color, and frontline communities. These groups hold vulnerability, wisdom, experience, and alternative ecological relationship models. (Tahmasebi, 2021). Leadership that is resilient in a climate context must center these perspectives, not as symbolic inclusion but as essential to the process of truth-telling and power-sharing.

Theories such as servant leadership contribute meaningfully here, particularly in their emphasis on ethics, humility, and service orientation (Greenleaf, 2008). Servant leaders prioritize the needs of others and act with long-term integrity rather than short-term gain. However, servant leadership—like any model—carries shadow risks. Without awareness of psychological dynamics, it may become a mask for avoidance, passivity, or moral fatigue. Similarly, authentic leadership, which emphasizes transparency and moral conviction, can become distorted when authenticity becomes rigid or performative. Scholars have identified a paradox of authenticity: when leaders over-identify with their self-concept, they may resist change, ignore complexity, or unconsciously suppress dissenting views (Ibarra, 2015; Ladkin, 2021; Verhaal & Dobrev, 2022).

Effective climate leadership requires psychological literacy—tracking shadow behavior, shedding light on projection, and working with conflict. It cultivates reflexivity, humility, and emotional containment, rather than idealizing harmony or authority. This leadership welcomes discomfort as a path toward integration and views ethical failure as a site for reflection and repair.

In Jungian psychology, the goal of an individual's journey in learning the concept of archetypes and knowing oneself is to find the equitable balance between among all archetypes inside and to create a moment of peace within through individuation. Such a balance could be achieved at the societal level through the shared distribution of power and influence. When influential leaders share decisions and their implications, it could lead to a balanced form of leadership. Interestingly, this type of leadership has a collective implication in indigenous cultures. They have a shared decision-making structure at the leadership level, known as ensemble leadership (Rosile, Boje, & Claw, 2018). The Iroquois Confederacy, a longstanding alliance of Indigenous nations in North America, could be a viable solution to climate change. Founded on principles of collective governance, consensus decision-making, and shared leadership, it served as a sophisticated model of democratic organization that influenced modern political systems and emphasizes harmony, balance, and responsibility among its member nations (Rosile et al., 2018).

One promising alternative is the shift towards ensemble leadership—a model rooted in Indigenous traditions and systems thinking. This leadership theory emphasizes shared decision-making, collective wisdom, and distributed responsibility. Instead of placing authority in a single heroic figure, ensemble leadership views leadership as an emergent, relational process. The essential antidote to the shadows of power is the shared decision-making process, which, given the complexity of climate factors and the diversity of climate action, the shared decision-making process is the essential antidote to the shadows of power. When there is a lack of shared responsibility among industrialized and developing countries regarding carbon accountability, the ensemble leadership will help balance the power distribution and ensure the that policies and action plans are adopted for impacted communities.

An ethical principle in decision-making suggests that fairness is best achieved when both parties are involved in determining the outcome. For example, if a cake is to be divided equally between two people, one person cuts the cake while the other chooses their piece first. This structure incentivizes the person cutting the cake to act fairly, knowing that any bias will disadvantage them. In the context of climate policy, this principle implies that when powerful political actors design environmental frameworks, the most vulnerable communities should have the authority to evaluate and prioritize the outcomes.

Ensemble leadership decentralizes complex systems, fostering reflection, shared responsibility, and emotional integration. By acknowledging and working with psychological complexes, leaders can create adaptive, resilient, and ethically grounded climate action. Inspired by Indigenous governance systems and relational worldviews, ensemble leadership emphasizes shared power, mutual responsibility, and collective wisdom (Rosile et al., 2018). It views leadership as a dialogue-driven process, not positional authority, inviting difference, nonlinearity, and uncertainty without chaos.

Fostering effective climate leadership involves institutional transformation and inner work. It requires confronting uncertainty without repression, grieving without collapse, and sharing responsibility without losing one's voice. Jungian psychology reminds us that the task is to integrate the shadow into conscious life. This integration makes leadership more ethical, effective, and responsive to the world it seeks to serve.

**Integration and Conclusion**

This essay has argued that climate leadership cannot be fully understood or ethically practiced without engaging the unconscious psychological dynamics that shape action, avoidance, and denial. Drawing on Jungian psychology, it explored how repression, projection, complexes, and the shadow influence leaders' perceptions, decisions, and narratives in the face of ecological crisis. These psychological mechanisms aren't limited to individual pathology; they also manifest at collective levels through organizational culture, political framing, and national identity. Reframing leadership through this lens reveals that climate inaction isn't just a political or logistical failure but also a psychodynamic event rooted in unintegrated shadow material that hinders relational, ethical, and systemic transformation.

Across the leadership triangle—power, influence, and people—unconscious distortions arise when one dimension dominates or is cut off from the others. Such a distortion often results in performative climate action, moral disengagement, or displacement of responsibility. Shadow dynamics such as denial, control, and scarcity frequently surface in these imbalances, reinforcing extractive logics and hierarchical decision-making that contradict the urgency of collective climate responsibility. These shadows are not abstract; they shape real-world patterns such as delayed policies, growth-at-all-costs ideologies, climate blame games, and leadership paralysis in the face of emotional and ecological overload.

Jungian shadow appears at any point of contrast, including too much attention or intense repression in an individual's life experience. These contrasts often take the form of rejection, projection, denial, and complex. At the societal level—particularly within leadership cultures that elevate the heroic, individualistic ideal (Riggio, 2023)—shadows frequently emerge as misjudgments, reactive decisions, or ethical disorientation. When a multifaceted crisis such as climate change arises, it often invites a leader's unilateral

response that prioritizes immediate interests or institutional survival over long-term ecological justice. In turn, these decisions trigger new rounds of denial, projection, and fragmentation across society's psychological landscape.

The essay has shown that sustainable leadership must combine external solutions with internal psychological integration. Without confronting their own projections and internal contradictions, leaders risk perpetuating the very fragmentation they aim to resolve. When shadow material remains disowned, it becomes embedded in political systems and cultural narratives—repeating cycles of moral dislocation and ecological harm. In contrast, leaders who engage in inner work—acknowledging uncertainty, fear, and historical trauma—are more capable of fostering relational transparency and mutual accountability.

Ensemble leadership was offered as a practical alternative to hero-centric models. Its emphasis on shared responsibility, distributed authority, and Indigenous-rooted relationality diffuses individual shadow dynamics and supports systems that can hold contradiction without collapse. Likewise, resilient leadership, grounded in emotional intelligence, adaptability, and inclusion, offers a pathway to respond to climate disruption without succumbing to despair, dogma, or domination. These models aren't just stylistic preferences; they're psychological containers that can hold the magnitude of the climate challenge with humility and ethical clarity.

In the final analysis, climate leadership is not simply about vision or innovation; it is also about psychological maturity. The challenge of climate change demands more than policies—it requires leaders who have confronted their inner shadows and integrated the unconscious forces that influence perception and action. By doing so, they create the conditions for relational transparency, mutual accountability, and an expanded ethical field in which shared responsibility becomes possible. This orientation fosters a societal shift toward recognizing not only present obligations but also intergenerational equity as a central principle of climate justice. When the principles of Jungian psychology are integrated into leadership practice, they illuminate the deepest obstacle to climate action: not a lack of knowledge but the unexamined shadow. Only by confronting what has been denied—within us, our institutions, and our cultures—can we begin to lead with the clarity and courage that this planetary moment demands.

**Contributors:**

Eissa Hashemi is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Organizational leadership in the I/O Psychology Department at The Chicago School. His research contributes to the holistic approach to authentic leadership, diversity and inclusion, resilience, depth psychology, and environmental psychology. He has over 15 years of scholarly contribution including teaching and publishing on leadership studies and organizational Jungian perspectives.

Maryam Tahmasebi is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Psychology at Los Angeles Pierce College and The Chicago School. She has a Master of Science in Agricultural and natural resources economics and an MA and PhD in Community, indigenous, and ecological psychology. Her multidisciplinary work includes experiences of climate crisis in indigenous agricultural communities, decolonial psychology, feminist psychology, and public education.

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